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# The Highlander Fling

PUBLISHED BY THE HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL, MONTEAGLE, TENN.

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## STORY OF A SOUTHERN PEOPLE'S SCHOOL



"Little to show for democracy—plenty of hunger"

### ORE MINERS STUDY ABC'S OF UNIONS

Editor's Note: This account of one of our more recent extension classes is an example of Highlander taking its educational program to the unions.

Mountains of rock and dust called "chat," waste product of the lead and zinc mills, dominate the landscape of the Tri-State mining camp of Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri. In their shadow the miners have waged a bitter struggle against starvation wages, long hours, violence. In 1935 a company-dominated "blue card union" marched 500 thugs armed with pick handles down the main street of Picher during a strike of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union.

The "Chat" piles are 97 per cent silica. The slightest wind fills the air with the powdered rock dust. Streets in the company towns are paved with chat and it is used on the school playground. Not only miners and millmen, but their wives and children, have silicosis.

December 5, 1946, marked a turning point in the lives of the ore miners. On that day two events took place. The CIO Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers signed a contract covering employees of the largest operator in the camp and ending a period of brutal company rule. A nine-day labor school, conducted jointly by Highlander and the MMSW, was opened for Tri-State workers.

"It was a coincidence that these two things happened on the same day, but not that they came in the same month," says THE UNION, MMSW paper. "When the organizing job was completed, Mine-Mill people of the Tri-States quickly turned their attention to strengthening the union by training and preparing union people to serve the union better."

Some fifty members of the MMSW, United Rubber Workers and Amalgamated Clothing Workers attended the classes conducted at Picher and Miami, Okla., and Joplin, Mo. Most of them were officers and stewards of local unions, many newly elected.

From the Highlander staff, Mary Lawrence handled a class on Building the Union; Catherine Winston, Political Action; and Bill Elkuss, Labor History and Parliamentary Law.

Morris Wright, editor of THE UNION, led discussions of MMSW policy. Attorneys Sylvan Bruner and Dan Leary taught classes in Labor Law, with emphasis on state workmen's compensation laws.

### THE BEGINNING— A FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

In 1932 working people were not talking much about democracy. They were talking about jobs—how to pay the grocery bill, the rent. There was little to show for democracy in the South. There was plenty of hunger.

Grundy County, Tennessee, was one of the eleven poorest counties in the United States—a foothill country of slashed-out timber, worked-out mines, washed-out land.

But to Grundy County, at the southern tip of the Cumberland Mountains, two young men came with an idea that economic and political democracy was possible. They believed that farm and factory workers, working together through their own organizations, could bring it about.

The Tennessean Myles Horton and the Georgian Dor West, equipped with a two-story frame house, a 40-acre mountain farm and a faith in the workability of democracy, opened Highlander Folk School in November 1932. While a few cabins have been added and the farm has grown to 200 acres, the idea and the faith are the same.

"The purpose of the Highlander Folk School is to assist in the defense and expansion of political and economic democracy," reads the statement of policy. "Since unions are basic to the achievement of democracy, the strengthening of unions through education is the school's primary task."

#### Few Unions in the South

This was an ambitious statement in 1932. There was little union organization in the South.

Highlander's program during the first year was primarily with the people of its own community. Clubs for the young people classes in arts and crafts, a community library. Neighbors gathered in the evenings for discussions.

### People Are Always Asking...

... How did Highlander get started? In this issue we have tried to present the background of the School and show how the present program developed.

The next issue reports a typical resident session. Issues that follow will describe extension classes, the Farmers Union, the present campaign.